

Hierarchies, Inequalities and Conflicts Through the Lens of Social Class

Hierarchies, inégalités et conflits à la lumière de la classe sociale

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Social class has long been a privileged, even dominant, analytical tool in the social sciences. This concept highlights the economic foundation of hierarchies, and forms of inequality, domination and oppression, as well as social and/or political conflicts at the local, national, and international levels. While the Marxist interpretive framework was declining, starting in the 1970s, the concept of social class was also increasingly relegated to the background, although Marx was not the only one to develop and popularize it. The emergence and consolidation of the cultural and linguistic turns, which stemmed from postmodernism, and later, of feminist and postcolonial approaches, despite their contributions to understanding and analyzing some hierarchies, inequalities, oppressions, and conflicts, also contributed to this trend. Thus, Vivek Chibber notes that by fostering skepticism toward structural approaches and systemic explanations, by emphasizing the particular or, ‘identity,’ at the expense of the general, and by prioritizing contingency over structures, these currents have obscured the continuities, regularities, and commonalities of a multitude of experiences and perspectives (Chibber 2022: 8–9). The intersectional approach acknowledges the need to combine perspectives to grasp various asymmetries and forms of domination; however, it can lead to the individualization of situations, therefore making them incommensurable. A rigorous intellectual debate on the possibility of harmonizing the Marxist class approach with that of intersectionality is underway (Kergoat 2009; Arruzza 2015; Foley 2020). The concept of social class underscores the common, economic basis of various forms of inequality and oppression and, therefore, the economic roots of different conflicts. The observation that capitalism is undergoing a profound crisis, has become consensual, not to say commonplace, in our time. As the living conditions of populations around the world steadily deteriorate, despite all national, regional, ethnic, cultural, and identity-based particularities, the common foundation of these evolutions across different contexts—the economic component—becomes unmistakable. Academic research has recently begun to reintegrate the economic as a category of analysis on its own, to supplement political and cultural perspectives and overcome the individualization of situations (Carrier 2015: 37). However, if the concept of social class has become widespread again in popular discourse, its reintegration into academic circles is lagging behind.

Although commonly associated with Marx and his followers, the concept of social class has been developed by other classical theorists such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim in the 19th century and, later, Pierre Bourdieu. Despite the differences that set them apart, these thinkers agree that societies are organized on an unequal, vertical basis, with certain groups and individuals concentrating more power, income, and wealth than others. These authors believe that these asymmetries, which are rooted in economic relations between actors, affect other social processes (Manza: 2025). For Marx, class membership depends on an individual's position in the social relations of production, like all social relationships, which unfold under the banner of class struggle. For Max Weber, it is circulation rather than production that determines social classes in the first place; classes are shaped by the power of individuals in the market and property ownership. Like Marx, Weber recognizes that the class position of an individual strongly impacts the other spheres of his/her existence. Status (or *Stand*) is another central concept in his work; status determines opportunities, but it is not synonymous with the social class (Carrier 2015: 29-30, 35). The Weberian concept of status has often been appropriated apart from his conception of the social class and even in opposition to it; and yet, the hierarchies they produce can be articulated with one another (Roueff 2024: 377). Émile Durkheim's position, although intended as a response to Marx, like Weber's, drags economic relations and production, more specifically the division of labor, to the heart of the analysis of society. Where Durkheim challenges Marx, is by singling out the differentiation of tasks within the occupational hierarchy, rather than homogenization, as the defining characteristic of capitalist societies (Manza 2025). As to Pierre Bourdieu's approach, which was intersectional before its time, it draws on Weber's acknowledgment of a plurality of hierarchies and on his distinction between material and symbolic power to renew the concept of social class. For Bourdieu, grasping class calls for a multidimensional perspective, since the social class is the outcome of a constellation of variables (such as age, gender, education level, and profession), whose relationships determine social position (Roueff 2024: 377–379). In line with Weber's distinction between the symbolic and the material, Bourdieu sets apart different types of capital, namely, economic, informational, and social. He emphasizes the expression of class inequalities through differences in knowledge, taste, and consumption, while the Bourdieusian concept of habitus acknowledges the impact of class situation on ways of thinking and behavior (Manza 2025). While Bourdieu was developing his ideas and the concept of class was entering its decline, it was fruitfully appropriated by leading authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin to analyze colonialism, the postcolonial condition, and global inequalities.

Several recent studies return to Marxist versions of the concept of class to address issues related to the environment (Huber 2022), gender, or race (Roediger 2017). However, some authors turn to the theories of Bourdieu (Hugrée, Penissat, and Spire 2020), Weber (Breen 2005; Moen 2025), or even Durkheim (Grusky and Galescu 2005) in connection with the concept of social class. One also witnessed a renewed interest in the ideas of Immanuel Wallerstein in the last two decades (Dufoix et Hugot 2021), while the field of postcolonial studies started to reconsider its relationship to the concept (Pradella 2016). Thus, the concept of class is being slowly reintegrated, but its specific contribution relative to other interpretive frameworks is yet to be shown. This conference aims to contribute to this task. While returns to the concept are more often observed among sociologists, it can help open new perspectives in history, political science, and other social sciences, as well as in gender and postcolonial studies. Going back to structuralist, economic

approaches opens new avenues for analyzing the sources and mechanisms of various hierarchies and inequalities, and of social and/or political conflicts at the local, national and international levels, in the past and the present, and can contribute to developing fruitful solutions to contemporary social issues and movements. We are seeking submissions that use the concept of social class to shed light on past and present phenomena and situations, and theoretical contributions highlighting its capacity to renew perspectives on the following themes (other topics may be accepted):

Women's status/feminism and social class

Ethnic conflicts and social class

Religious conflicts and social class

Violence(s) and social class

Racism and social class

Nationalisms and social class

Imperialism and social class

War and social class

Political polarization or politics and social class

Colonialism/ postcolonialism and social class

Marginalization and social class

Submissions: **500-700-word** submissions must be sent by **June 6, 2026**, at the latest to **classconceptconference@gmail.com**. The languages of presentations must be **English or French**. In your proposal, please specify your institutional affiliation and status (faculty member, researcher, doctoral student, postdoctoral fellow). The organizers will reserve a few slots for doctoral students. Notification of acceptance or rejection will be sent during the week of June 21. The conference fee will be approximately \$200 CAD; the exact amount will be confirmed by August 2026 at the latest. Please note that this conference is an **in-person event only**.

Conference website: <https://conferenceclassconceptmtl2026.com/>.

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